



NEWS RELEASE

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69 SOLDIERS EARN 'EXPERT' STATUS

By Amanda Kim Stairrett
Staff writer

Earning the Expert Infantryman Badge takes a few things: practice, focus, determination and, for Spcs. Austin Brown, Michael Graves, Dominic Lazaga and Justin Nelson, friends and humor.

The four 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, Soldiers and others on post were named expert infantrymen at a ceremony April 28 at Craig Gym.

Brown, Graves, Lazaga, Nelson and another friend, Spc. Will McMillan, used humor to lighten the tense mood during practice and testing.

"We made it fun," Brown said, after the April 28 ceremony. "Some need to concentrate more than others. Our group needs to loosen up and have fun with it."

About 600 Soldiers volunteered for the tough evaluation of their Soldiering skills. After prerequisites that included a 12-mile foot march in three hours, day and night land navigation tests, weapons qualification and physical fitness tests, 216 Soldiers began training for the final testing.

After the first day of testing, 154 remained.

After the second day, that number dwindled to 102.

After the final day of testing, 69 Fort Riley Soldiers earned their Expert Infantryman Badges and 11 were distinguished as being "True Blue," meaning they made no mistakes. Nelson was one of those "True Blue" Soldiers.

"Recipients of the EIB must be tough, aggressive and have high standards, such as the 69 Soldiers standing before you today," said Lt. Col. Frank Zachar, 1st Bn., 16th Inf., commander. The 1st Bn., 16th Inf., sponsored the EIB testing.

To be named an expert infantryman, Soldiers had to complete 35 tasks that tie into infantry skill sets, said 1st Bn., 16th Inf., Command Sgt. Maj. Robert French.

The stations were set up northwest of Camp Forsyth near the rappelling tower. Soldiers had to master such tasks as programming radios, throwing hand grenades accurately, moving under fire and manning all weapons systems.

During the three days of testing, each Soldier had two chances to pass a station. If he missed twice, he was out and must try again during the next EIB testing period. Soldiers aren't limited to how many times they can try to earn their EIB and can keep trying for years, said Maj. David Wood, battalion executive officer.

Graves said he has tried five times, Brown twice and Lazaga and Nelson once each.

Participation in the training is voluntary, but Soldiers are "highly encouraged" to try, because it looks good for promotion, Wood said.

Lazaga said humor was important because some Soldiers take the testing too seriously and it messes with their concentration.

"At first they didn't want us going through together because they thought we wouldn't train enough," Brown said while at the EIB site April 21. But it was that camaraderie that helped the Soldiers. Graves has tried for his EIB alone before and said it was harder alone.

"Now, in a group, we can talk it over with each other," he said, while sitting with his friends at the EIB site April 21.

Lazaga said each person in the group had his specific strengths, and that lent to their success because they could share tips.

Lazaga said he's strong with weapons, Graves is good with maps and Brown at land navigation. Nelson claimed his specialty was making the group laugh. Graves responded by firmly shaking his head "no" behind Nelson.

"I lighten the mood," Nelson deadpanned.

"He was our nanny," someone joked as the group burst into laughter.

"Yeah, I kept 'em in line," Nelson agreed, with a smile.

Nelson admitted he was nervous the first day of testing on April 25 because it was cold and rainy. That nervousness eventually subsided and he passed with no mistakes.

"Getting 'True Blue' for me was luck of the draw because I wasn't planning on it," he said. "I was just concentrating on getting through with no no-gos."

The four all said they were proud to earn the EIB, but glad that the testing and the pressure that came with it was over.

Before the official testing began, Lazaga sat at the site April 21 and contemplated what it would take for him to earn his EIB in the coming days.

"How much heart do you have? That's what it comes down to," he said.